Archival Silences: Was Edmonia Lewis Queer?

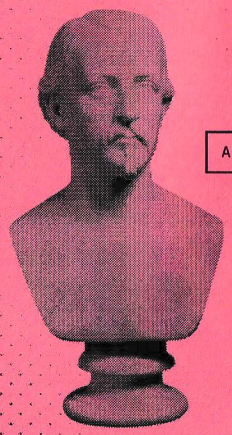
Let's talk about it!

Queer History Boston

About Edmonia Lewis

Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907) was a Black and Mississauga Native American sculptor. Born in upstate New York, she spent the majority of her youth outdoors and in nature before attending Oberlin College to further her studies.

After experiencing racial prejudice and violence from her peers, she left Oberlin for Boston to study sculpture.



A

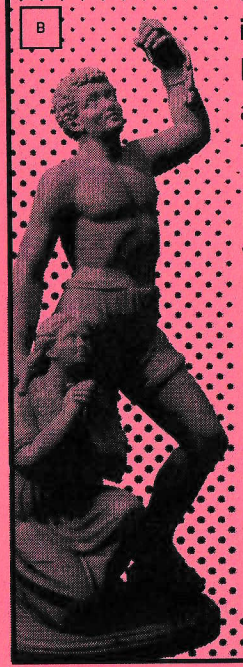
Her early works, busts of white abolitionists and social activists, financed her move to Rome in 1865.

"I was practically driven to Rome in order to obtain the opportunities for art-culture, and to find a social atmosphere where I was not constantly reminded of my color. The land of liberty had no room for a colored sculptor."

Lewis in an Interview with The New York Times. December 29, 1878.

Only in this artist community in Rome could Edmonia feel like she could live authentically. While driven from the United States based on racial prejudice, Edmonia also sought out and found community with those who broke gender and relationship norms.

Even after her departure for Rome, Lewis remained significant to African American communities in New England.



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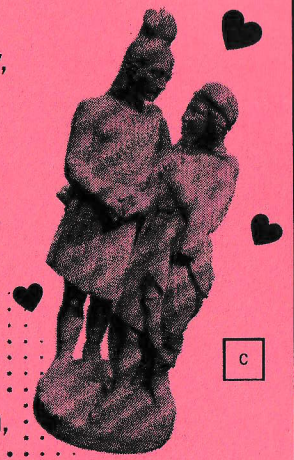
In *Moving Stones: About the Art of Edmonia Lewis*, Jennifer DeVere Brody sheds light on the impact of Edmonia Lewis on Black queer women by analyzing Addie Brown's letters to Rebecca Primus.

Devoted romantic friends, Brown wrote over a hundred letters to Primus from 1859 to 1869.

In a letter dated November 17, 1867, Brown writes, "I wish there was many more like Miss Edmonie Lewis." That same day, Brown sent another letter to Primus describing a sexual encounter with a woman.

So is Edmonia queer?

While we do not have the documentary evidence that confirms Edmonia's sexuality, we do know that she lived outside the norms of her time by prioritizing her relationships with other women and her career as a sculptor. Her gender transgressions and relationships indicate that she might call herself lesbian, bisexual, or queer today.[1]



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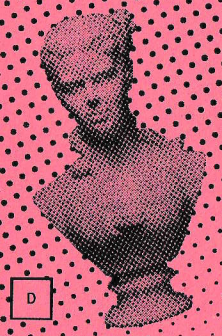
[1] The term lesbian was not commonly used until decades after Edmonia's death. In the late 1800s, the term "Boston Marriage" was sometimes used to describe women in committed partnerships.

Here is what we do know:

Edmonia Lewis moved to Rome in 1865 and joined a community of vibrant women artists. Many were connected through actress Charlotte Cushman.



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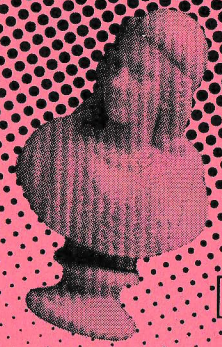
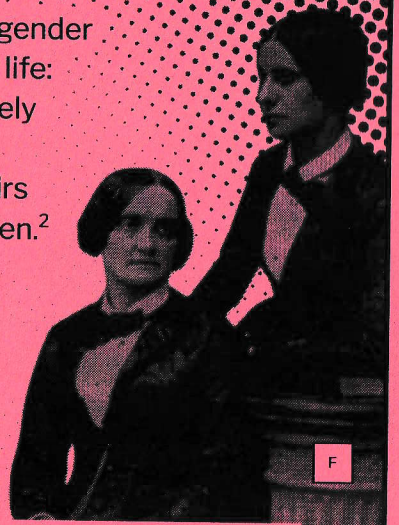


E

An early practitioner of 'method acting,' Cushman was America's first celebrity and known for masterfully playing both male and female roles on stage.

Cushman also defied gender norms in her personal life: she dressed masculinely and had passionate relationships and affairs with high-profile women.[2]



F

Cushman gathered lovers and friends in her Roman salon, including queer writer Matilda Hays, and artists Florence Freeman, Anne Whitney, Harriet Hosmer, Emma Stebbins, Margaret Foley, and **Edmonia Lewis.**

[2] Letters written by Cushman, Hosmer, and Hays confirm that Cushman's relationships with women were more than platonic.

Why do people think Edmonia Lewis was Queer?

Edmonia Lewis falls into something historians call *queer possibility.*

Queer possibility is an interpretive strategy that uplifts the marginalized narratives of both LGBTQ historical figures and objects of queer significance. [3]

[3] This term was coined by museum professional Margaret Middleton to describe historical figures and art that fall outside of heteronormativity, but that we don't know enough about to determine their queerness.

How do we find queer people in history?

While queer people have been around for as long as humans have existed, it is often difficult to find evidence and proof of their existence. This is in part because of **"archival silence."**

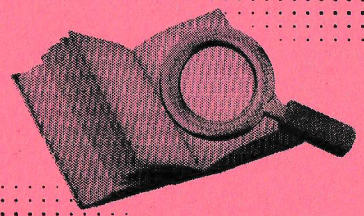
Archival institutions intentionally collect materials, papers, and ephemera documenting organizations and people they deem important. This means that **those who fall outside of an institution's idea of "important" are left out**, along with parts of people's lives deemed unsavory by these institutions.

Some contemporary historians and curators may be hesitant to label Edmonia as part of the queer community, that doesn't stop the queer community from claiming her.

For decades, Black lesbians have looked into the past and seen themselves in her.

Archival silences mean that historic queer people don't often have extensive documentation about their lives. Black lesbians are even harder to find because their work has been historically co-opted or devalued.

Queer History Boston exists to document ourselves and combat archival silence!

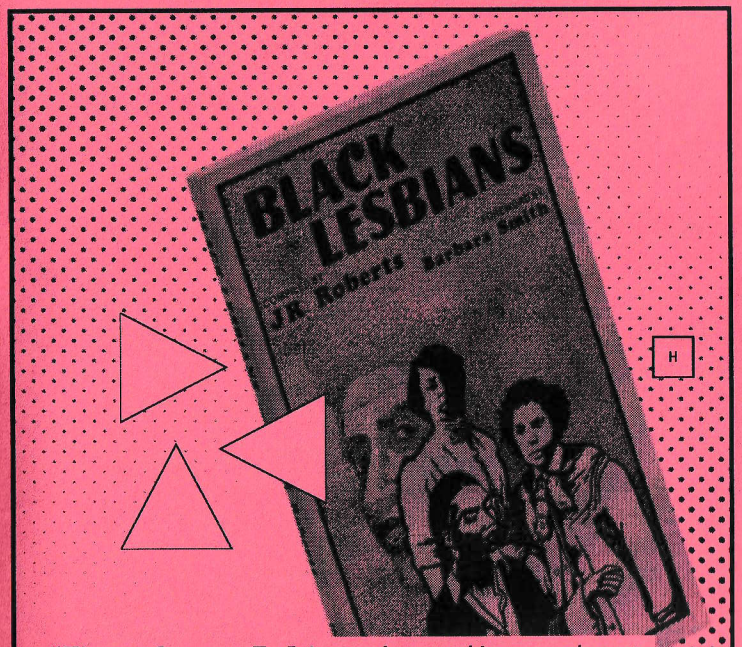


Even if proof doesn't always exist, we know that we have always been here!

Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography

In 1981, JR Roberts (a white lesbian and early Queer History Boston member) worked to combat these silences. She published *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography with a* foreword by prominent Black feminist lesbian Barabara Smith. Edmonia Lewis is featured in this book as a queer ancestor.

Roberts argues that to find lesbians in history: "Other factors in a woman's life must also be considered, i.e., the quality and extent of her relationships with women... non-traditional lifestyles, and contact and association with known lesbian women."



"Therefore, I listed readings about women such as Edmonia Lewis and Mary Fields whose life histories, although not demonstrably lesbian in a sexual sense, are "lesbian" if we expand our definition to include other factors which intimate a lesbian identity."

(JR Roberts, xiii)

Explicit evidence is not needed
to know that Edmonia Lewis
was part of a queer community.

One can instead
look to who and where
she found her joy:
circles of women
who cross-dressed, who
loved and slept with each other,
rejected conventional
domestic life, and built
messy, creative,
and queer lives together.

Edmonia Lewis (1843?-1909?)
Sculptor

I

Lewis moved within a world of women
whose intimacies and gender expressions
exceeded easy definition.

Queer people continue to recognize
themselves in her life today.

Learn more and see the image citations at
QueerHistoryBoston.org/edmonia-zine

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